

Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of COVID-19's Impact in the African American Community

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from the viewpoint of African American leadership (and followership) as the coronavirus pandemic continues to prompt a shift towards a global paradigm in the face of a rising counter-paradigm of xenophobic nationalism and populism. The SPELIT model (Schneider-Ramirez & Mallette, 2006) is leveraged to evaluate the varied perspectives of this complex issue from the lens of social, political, economic, legal, intercultural and technological factors. Ethnic inclusiveness is explored as well as the de-legitimation of existing global institutions. This research is intended to contribute to elevating the level of conscious awareness of any organization or individual seeking to understand the multiple viewpoints surrounding the societal impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic. The root causes of societal division and unrest are also examined and attributed to the virus of systemic racism which is referenced as COVID-401, reflective of the 401 years since the first African slaves arrived in the United States.

KEYWORDS: structural racism, restorative leadership

Introduction

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, sparked a call for socially conscious policing and intolerance for xenophobia. At the time of George Floyd's death, the coronavirus pandemic had already disproportionately impacted the African American community in the United States as evidenced in increased morbidity and unemployment rates. Data from a McKinsey analysis revealed that US counties with the highest risk of health and economic disruption were almost twice as likely to be inhabited by Black Americans (Howard et al. 2020). Race is directly linked to health inequities (Williams & Collins, 1995). Per the CDC, there is a direct correlation between poverty levels and both physical and mental health (Howard et al. 2002).

Different perspectives have arisen from the varied voices of leadership and followership around the global pandemic's impact particularly within the African American community. One of the varied perspectives questions if the social status quo exacerbates the pandemic's devastation within the African American community. Another one of the varied perspectives questions if patriotism is a guise for racism. An additional query is how much of an economic toll will the pandemic have on the African American community? From a legal lens of church versus state, the pandemic presents a particular challenge within the African American church, an institutional bedrock within the Black community, around their right to congregate. The pandemic also raises intercultural inquiries around how much collaboration, if any, does the African American community seek to engage in on a global scale. The pandemic also poses questions around accessibility to technology within the African American community. Each of these varied lenses are further examined in the proceeding sections from the lens of both a restorative and humanistic leadership model.

Restorative Leadership

In their book, *Evolving Leadership for Collective Wellbeing: Lessons for Implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*, the authors present a model of restorative leadership that empowers the community to fulfill its leadership potential (Steffen, Rezmovits,

Trevenna & Rappaport 2019, 62). Although the authors' focus on restorative leadership is based on sustainable development and protecting the Earth for future generations, the restorative leadership model can also be applied in the context of healing from the social, political, economic and multi-factored impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Steffen, Rezmovits, Trevenna & Rappaport posit that restorative leadership uses a participatory approach of asking, listening, aligning and co-creating (p. 49) within communities to reach sustainable solutions. Applying this approach in the broader context of the addressing community-based healing from the multi-factored impact of the coronavirus pandemic requires a worldview of all of humanity as a collective community that is interdependent on various smaller communities, including the African American community.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic the African American community experienced the re-opening of old wounds of social inequity triggered by the murder of George Floyd who died on Memorial Day 2020 after almost 9 minutes of an officer kneeling on Floyd's neck when Floyd was being restrained for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill. Floyd's homicide served as a catalyzing event that awakened worldwide social movements and revived a recollection of Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Botham Jean, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray and so many countless, unnamed others who have suffered similar fates as Floyd. Protests ensued in which the often-stifled voices of marginalized people were amplified in collective solidarity with some support from local governments, faith-based institutions, and like-minded leaders and individuals demanding social justice. Xenophobic nationalism was placed under a social microscope. Restorative leaders were afforded the perfect platform for unifying communities of color with the law enforcement community and the broader global community of humanity in order to move towards collective healing. However, the first step towards healing involves acknowledgment of wounds and moving past denial into acceptance that there is a problem that requires restoration. As such, the following sections further examine some of the pre-existing social wounds viewed by many people of color as previously disregarded by established elite groups.

Social Upheaval, Unrest and Structural Racism

During the coronavirus pandemic, rioting and looting reappeared as a historical flashback to the 1960s US Civil Rights Movement. Largely provoked by the unjustified murder of George Floyd, the riots and protests that ensued were viewed, along a spectrum of two extremes, by some as a symbolic statement to raise the social conscience of the public about police brutality towards Blacks and, on the other extreme, viewed by others as deplorable disorderly conduct. Here is what Martin Luther King said about riots:

Urban riots are a special form of violence. They are not insurrections. The rioters are not seeking to seize territory or to attain control of institutions...Often the Negro does not even want what he takes; he wants the experience of taking. But most of all, alienated from society and knowing that this society cherishes property above people, he is shocking it by abusing property rights. There are thus elements of emotional catharsis in the violent act.

These words of MLK posit the root cause and proximate causes of the problem with protests that have resurged during the pandemic. Structural racism is the root cause that prompts displaced anger and frustration directed towards police and other institutions as well as businesses that represent elite establishment. Scholars have defined structural racism as "the processes, and institutions that operate at the macro level to produce and reproduce differential access to power and to life opportunities along racial and ethnic lines" (Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012). Proximate

causes of the problem include social inequality, wealth and health disparities, and inequitable education and employment.

Given the various historical inequities experienced by Blacks, the June 2020 plea made to the United Nations by George Floyd's brother to address police brutality is framed in an understandable context. Philonise Floyd urged the UN Human Rights Council to investigate police killings of Blacks in America (Dwyer 2020). After all, as noted in International Organization and Global Governance, the responsibility to protect (or "R2P") is a doctrine that "was born out of egregious examples of nations failing to intervene in the face of the most serious violations of the human rights of innocent civilians by their own governments" (Weiss & Wilkinson 2018, 531). In cases of protecting human rights, the UN Security Council can authorize the use of military force. As aptly stated by Simon Chesterman, "the problem is not the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, but the overwhelming prevalence of inhumanitarian non-intervention. Addressing that problem requires mobilizing the political will of member states as much as it does the creation of new legal rules... The problem is the absence of the will to act at all." (Weiss & Wilkinson 2018, 542). This level of apathetic aversion to act contrasts with how casting isolated "no" votes or abstaining from voting altogether are looked upon unfavorably in the UN and the General Assembly as per M. J. Peterson (p. 241). Indeed, lack of tolerance for apathy is one hallmark characteristic of pandemic populism. A newly defined majority of marginalized groups, such as Blacks and indigenous people, has increasingly rejected apathetic acceptance of the status quo. As a "house divided cannot stand" (King James Bible, Matthew 12:25), this evolving movement of the marginalized majority has given rise to a redefined form of populism, decoloniality and de-legitimation of existing institutions and symbols.

Political Proclivity for Populism

Generations X and Y have a different perspective and tolerance level for racial inequity and injustice than baby boomers. However, when some generation Xers were asked about their feelings upon hearing about George Floyd, some simply responded "again?" Whereas some may apathetically view these events as yet another occurrence of common experiences, others are encouraged by the potential for meaningful change. This is an inflection point in history that could translate into meaningful change for the better. Yet, given that laws and public policy generally tend to lag public sentiment and the social milieu, this compels some to ask the question of how long the existing climate of uncertainty and unrest will remain in effect before meaningful change is achieved. As one example of change lagging behind social movements, consider the Montgomery bus boycott lasted 381 days (History.com Editors, 2010). Nevertheless, from the time of Montgomery buses being integrated by law on December 21, 1956, to the present day, controversy remains in the racially-polarized United States with respect to the real world application of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which was ostensibly intended to prohibit discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

Per the CDC, COVID-19 was first detected in the US in February 2020 and, as of the time of this writing, appears to be trending upward in cases with Blacks having a hospitalization rate that is five times that of Whites (CDC, June 2020). Will things need to get worse before they get better? Discussions about the disproportionate impact of coronavirus within communities of color are evolving as the virus spreads and extant data becomes available. Similarly, broader discussions about the social virus of structural racism that has historically afflicted the US have evolved throughout the pandemic as well. Conversations about diversity and inclusion in many circles are long-overdue. Within some circles, these conversations have been very insular and not receptive to engaging different viewpoints from people of different backgrounds. Massive change has come about in a very short amount of time putting some of "the onlys" in the spotlight with even more attention being paid to those who may have previously not been accustomed to such heightened attention. The Only is

defined by being “the only one” of any single identity within a broader majority group. As noted in a 2018 McKinsey study, “by and large, white men who are Onlys have a better experience than any other group of Onlys, likely because they are broadly well represented...and are a high-status group in society” (Krivkovich et al. 2018). From a political lens within the United States, the Senate serves as one example of the high-status of white men given that the Senate has “an affluent membership composed mostly of white men, who are about 30% of the population but hold 71 [out of 100] seats” (Robinson 2019). Within the US, a minority of elite white men govern a majority of underrepresented marginalized constituencies. As reported by the Pew Research Center, “as of 2019, there is greater representation in some areas – 52 House members are Black, putting the share of Black House members (12%) on par with the share of Blacks in the U.S. population overall for the first time in history. But in other areas, there has been little change (there are three Black senators and no Black governors)” (Pew Research Center 2020). This very visible reflection of disenfranchisement has prompted a shift in political proclivity towards populism. Author James McGann cites the election of Donald Trump as prompting nativism and extreme nationalism (Weiss & Wilkinson 2018, 406). This is evidenced in a recent Gallup poll indicating 77% of respondents view immigration favorably for the betterment of the US (Gallup 2007), despite the current US administration’s slant toward xenophobic nationalism.

Economic

Originating from the times of slavery when Negroes were forced to provide free labor, African Americans have helped build generational wealth for many of the elite within the United States. Generational wealth acquisition and accumulation by African Americans has been hampered by slavery’s legacy of discrimination, stalling progress by African Americans in obtaining wealth (Craemer et al. 2020). From an economic lens, multi-generational wealth (or lack thereof) is transferred to subsequent generations (Darity et al. 2018). Even prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the 2018 US Census Data reported 20.8% poverty rate among Blacks, the second highest in the US behind 25.4% for Native Americans as compared to 10.1% for Whites (Poverty facts | Poverty USA n.d.). A June 2020 report from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) highlights the disproportionate impact of coronavirus capitalism on the black unemployment rate at 16.7% as compared to white unemployment at 14.2% as of April 2020 (Economic Policy Institute 2020). The EPI report further highlights that Black women experienced the largest drop in employment, noting 16.9% unemployment as of April 2020, which has a ripple effect within African American households where Black women, according to the US Census Bureau, are 3.6 times more likely than White women to be head of households with minor children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Compounding the concerns of transmission of coronavirus, Black households have twice the likelihood of having three or more generations (e.g. grandparents) living in the same household as do White households and are twice as likely to live in densely populated housing areas than Whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). As a result of persistent racial wage and wealth gaps (Gould 2020; Wilson and Rodgers 2016), Black families have less access than Whites to cash reserves that may be required to weather the financial storm of COVID-19 (Federal Reserve Board 2016). Indeed, as cited by the EPI, institutionalized racism and economic inequality were underlying pre-existing conditions exacerbating the adverse effects of coronavirus within the African American community (Economic Policy Institute 2020).

Legal: De-Legitimation of Existing Institutions

At this momentous time in history, the coronavirus pandemic has converged with a surge of global anti-xenophobic protests. Amid the coronavirus pandemic and social unrest, patriotism is being redefined. The removal of confederate flags, statues and renaming of institutions are some

examples of the de-legitimation of existing institutions and the decolonialization movement that has emerged. Weiss and Wilkinson (2018, 206) offer the Black Lives Matter movement as one example of decoloniality. Renaming institutions and similar change efforts have been questioned by some, at one extreme, as defiant acts of unpatriotic anarchists and upheld by others as long-overdue testaments to equal rights and human dignity. Research conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center of the over 1500 confederate symbols on display throughout the US as of February 2019 reveals that they predominantly reside in former confederate states (Southern Poverty Law Center 2019). Monuments are built to honor history. While the confederate symbols may be viewed by some as a tribute to the Civil War, given that the majority were dedicated between 1900-1920 at the height of Jim Crow laws in the South, one might be compelled to ask whose history are these monuments honoring?

By examining the trauma of microaggressions experienced by many people of color, one may be able to better understand the context framing these actions as de-legitimation of existing establishments and symbols of the elite class. Microaggressions have been described as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of Blacks by offenders...Psychiatrists who have studied Black populations view them as ‘incessant and cumulative’ assaults on Black self-esteem” (Davis n.d.). As surmised by Peggy Davis in *Law as Microaggression*, “so long as legal decision making excludes Black voices, and hierarchical judgments predicated upon race are allowed insidiously to infect decisions of fact and formulations of law, minorities will perceive, with cause, that courts are fully capable-and regularly guilty-of bias. Minority communities will therefore continue to struggle with a mixed message of law: announced as the legitimate assertion of collective authority but perceived as microaggression.”

One example of a socially-conscious readjustment to the current climate of heightened awareness about racial injustice occurred at Princeton University in June 2020 when the board of trustees deemed that Woodrow “Wilson’s racist thinking and policies make him an inappropriate namesake” thereby reversing a decision they had previously dismissed in 2015 to remove Wilson’s name from their school of Public and International Affairs and one of their residential colleges (Princeton to remove Woodrow Wilson’s name from public policy school 2020). Ironically, one of Princeton’s alumni awards will retain Wilson’s name to maintain an endowment that legally obligates the University to name the prize for Wilson per the Trustees. This caveat of not having Wilson’s name eliminated completely from Princeton’s alumni award serves as an example of the limits of incremental change when economic trade-offs weigh into decision making.

Intercultural Implications

From an intercultural lens, the pandemic presents an opportunity to revisit the benefits of collaboration in a global setting. Hofstede (1980) defines being interculturally sensitive as being “aware of the points of view of others and to recognize differences in culture.” Additionally, Hofstede advises on the avoidance of ethnocentrism which is defined as an “exaggerated tendency to think the characteristics of one’s own group or race superior to those of other groups or races” (Hofstede 2001). Hofstede also posits that Maslow’s theory which “categorized and ordered human needs according to the U.S. middle-class culture pattern” (Hofstede 2001) is reflective of the mental programming that is prevalent in those who remain embedded in the same cultural environment. As reflected in the widening racial and economic divide in the U.S. middle-class, one might conclude that there is unique intercultural programming of Black, White, Hispanic and other ethnic groups concerning their respective perspectives of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The intersectionality of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs with the ethnoracial hierarchy that exists within the United States results in “limited access to life opportunities, with negative consequences for

the health [of groups ascribed to a lower status], including those related to well-documented stress-response physiological processes” (Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012).

It is interesting to note that, as observed during the writing of this text, a day that has traditionally been reserved for celebrating independence was markedly different in July 2020 due to concerns about large crowds gathering amidst the coronavirus pandemic. The predictions of historian Yuval Noah Harari appear to have eerily manifested in the current reality where patriotism and nationalism are dwarfed by the need for global cooperation to solve the world’s most pressing issues. Indeed rather than a celebration of the United States Independence Day in 2020, the followership of Harari may be inclined to instead call for a Day of Interdependence where there is a recognition of the global connection that all nations have with each other, and the need to reverse any prior mental programming towards individualistic orientations to shift towards collectivist orientations. The pandemic marks an intercultural inflection point where the nationalism of Independence Day has been transformed to global awareness of our interdependence as a human race.

Technology

Instant access to social media that is available to many in society has enabled the realization of how the media has portrayed images and propaganda to prompt fear, reinforcing certain identity-based biases (Lerman 2018). During the pandemic, namely with the access to the live video of George Floyd’s death, social media has raised awareness of the reality that many Blacks live in fear of their lives despite stereotypical, psychological programming that has historically portrayed Black men as prone to violence and to be feared, and Black women as angry with attitudes.

The well-researched digital divide has also received additional attention during the pandemic. According to the Pew Research Center, Blacks and Hispanics are significantly less likely than Whites to be equipped with broadband internet and computers, with both groups being more likely than Whites to depend on their smartphones as their sole source of internet access (Perrin and Turner 2019). This puts these marginalized groups at a disadvantage in limiting their ability to work from home or to receive online education. Therefore, livelihoods are jeopardized if unable to access technology, and the continued education of children and generations to come is compromised by lack of digital access.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has resulted in disparate impact in Black communities due to endemic racism tracing back to 1619 as the historic starting point of slavery in the United States. Although no one globally had immunity to COVID-19 initially, the disease has exposed levels of socio-economic immunity within the ethnoracial hierarchy of the United States where opportunity has not been equally distributed. Intercultural cooperation and global collaboration are required to inoculate all of humanity against the pervasive threat of structural racism, described as “COVID-401” (Congressional Black Caucus Foundation 2020).

In redefining a new model of restorative leadership (Steffen et al. 2019) in light of COVID-401, a sustainable solution starts with developing a sensitivity to recognizing an absence of divergent perspectives and non-monolithic cultures. Racism is learned behavior that can be unlearned, although structural racism is essentially on auto-pilot as it remains embedded in institutions, processes and mindsets despite the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Socioeconomic indicators of the continued existence of structural racism are evidenced in racially-based gaps in healthcare, economics and education. The worst disease that humanity can possibly face is not COVID-19. Long after a vaccine has been developed for coronavirus, we will be held accountable for how we have responded during this tipping point time in history to annihilating institutional racism. The racial divide in the United States (and globally) stands before us as a looming gap analogous to how crossing the Edmund Pettus

Bridge may have appeared ominous to some who dared to cross it on Bloody Sunday in 1965 marking a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. As humanity faces our current historic turning point during this double pandemic of civil unrest during a health crisis, a collective call to global action is aptly summed up in the words of civil rights icon John Lewis, “If not us, then who? If not now, then when?”

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